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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses teacher absenteeism via a 1978 preliminary study of 90 school systems by the American Association of School Personnel Administrators. The major causes of employee absenteeism, cited by the participating personnel directors, were (1) personal illness, (2) illness in the family, (3) personal leave days, (4) emergencies, (5) emotional problems, and (6) alcohol and drug-related absences. Based on the survey and a review of studies from Pennsylvania and Michigan, the paper recommends that administrators establish an employee absence monitoring system and try to reduce absenteeism through more organized efforts. It suggests a specific program that would (1) deal with all employees and be well communicated throughout the school system, (2) be supported by administrators at the top, (3) recognize and reward regular attendance, and (4) involve the teacher's immediate supervisor. (Author/LD)

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TEACHER ABSENTEEISM

A Study of the
Ohio Association of School Personnel Administrators

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Scope of the Problem

How many school administrators would knowingly be guilty of regularly committing a significant portion of their already lean budget to an expenditure that has little educational productivity? Not many. Unfortunately, almost every school district in the nation makes such expenditures on a daily basis.

Substitutes for absent teaching and non-teaching personnel are a significant portion of the budget in each school district. In a suburban Cleveland school district of 12,000 students, in addition to the \$12,000,000 already committed for teachers' salaries, the board of education expended \$50,000 during the 1979 calendar year for teacher substitutes. This was equivalent to all of the funds used to purchase educational equipment that year. In 1977 another major urban school system in Ohio expended \$2,933,233 or \$25.50 per pupil. A Pennsylvania study estimated that costs for filling vacancies with substitutes would be in excess of \$30,000,000 on a state-wide basis.¹ Most school districts can report similar types of cost figures.

Substitute costs are high and increase every year. A daily rate of \$35 to \$50 per day is not uncommon. Unfortunately, the educational value received for this expenditure is questionable. Many principals have been heard to observe, "If the sub can keep the lid on, that's all I ask." A study conducted by the Metropolitan School Study Council of Columbia University concluded that substitute teachers were educationally ineffective.² This study found that regular teachers were twenty times more effective than substitutes in secondary classrooms. Even student teachers were found to be more effective than substitutes.

Each day personnel directors across the nation are confronted by the need to identify qualified and available teacher substitutes. A significant

portion of directors' time is spent in screening applicants and placing them in instructional assignments, often on very short notice. It would be safe to assume in many districts that substitutes are selected because of their availability more often than they are selected for "successful teaching."

Recent research has demonstrated that a significant variable in student achievement is effective time spent in instructional activities.³ Unfortunately, research and practical experience show that substitute teachers are less effective in keeping students "on task" than are the regular teachers.⁴ This is not an indictment of substitute teachers, since it is almost impossible to come into a strange classroom, on short notice, with unfamiliar students, and maintain the continuity of an established learning program.

Chief school administrators are confronted with a two-edged sword: skyrocketing substitute teacher costs, and decreased instructional effectiveness. Both of these edges can cut deeply into the educational program. One commentator has described this as "tremendous financial leakage which makes schooling more expensive while reducing instructional quality."⁴

The American Association of School Personnel Administrators (AASPA), along with other educational groups, has become increasingly concerned with the question of teacher absenteeism. A preliminary study was conducted by AASPA in 1978 to verify the nature and scope of the problem. The insights gained from this study were shared with Educational Research Service, Inc. in Arlington, Virginia, who have launched a nationwide study of this question.

Absenteeism is not a new problem. Throughout history, organizations have had to deal with the problem of the short-term replacement of absent employees. Industrial managers have been much more sensitive to the impact of employee absenteeism, both in terms of dollars and productivity, than have educators. Recently, a vice-president of the Chase Manhattan Bank commented,

"The magnitude of the problem is almost unbelievable. Two and one-half million workers are absent each Monday - that is 4% of the working population."⁵ The direct cost in lost-but-paid-for labor alone hit over twenty-five billion dollars in 1978.

While generally aware of these business and industry statistics, school managers benignly thought that educators were immune to absenteeism of this magnitude. It was believed that "professionalism" insulated school employees from the trends evident throughout the rest of our society. However, the facts no longer support that conclusion. In the most recent data compiled by the Bureau of Census for the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the absence (inactivity rate) for white collar personnel between 1973 and 1976 was 2.6%. The blue collar rate was 4.4%.⁶ A study conducted by the Pennsylvania School Boards Association reported that the annual mean teacher absence rate was 4.7%.¹ The same Pennsylvania study found that the trend for teacher absenteeism indicates an approximate 5-6% increase between the years of 1961 to 1978. An earlier study completed for the Illinois State Board of Education showed that there had been a 16% increase in the rate of teacher absenteeism between the years 1971-72 to 1975-76.⁷

On an operational level, the 4.7% absence rate in the Pennsylvania study translates into approximately eight days of absence per teacher per year.¹ There can be no doubt that this issue warrants immediate attention.

Review of Research

In order to understand the nature of the research to date, the following is a review of the findings of several studies on teacher absenteeism. These include the preliminary study by AASPA of some ninety school systems, the Pennsylvania School Boards Association study involving 135 school districts,¹ and a study conducted by the Birmingham, Michigan school district.⁸

The preponderance of research indicates that teacher absenteeism is more prevalent on Mondays and Fridays. In the Ohio study of the school districts who computed absence on a daily basis, over half (54%) indicated that the frequency of absence was higher on Mondays and Fridays. The Pennsylvania study reported that the absence rate for Friday was 5.5% and Monday was 5.1%. The remaining days of the week were 4.5% or lower. Only the Michigan study showed any deviation from this trend, but that study revealed Monday as the day when most absences occur. The Monday-Friday syndrome has been confirmed in numerous studies in the private sector as well.

An organizational variable that seems to be directly related to absenteeism is size of district. The Pennsylvania study reported that small districts (less than 200 employees) had a lower absentee rate than large districts (more than 200 employees). This factor is further substantiated by a report by the New York State Office of Education that in New York City substitute teacher costs account for almost 9% of the city's total expenditure for teachers' salaries.⁴ Size of the work unit also has been verified as a major organizational variable in the private sector. This finding has several direct implications for organizing administrative procedures for dealing with staff absenteeism.

One would assume that absenteeism throughout the school year would somewhat replicate a normal curve distribution, with the highest rate of absenteeism occurring in the winter months. This is not the case. The Pennsylvania study reported that absenteeism increases steadily from September through May. The September absenteeism rate was reported at 2.6% while in May it was 4.78%. An interesting correlary is that the use of personal sick leave peaks in January, but that the use of personal leave (non-illness related absence) in May is almost double the average for the year. The conclusion that the study made was "apparently, many personal days are saved until the end of the school year."

An explanation of this phenomenon may be drawn from a study conducted by Instructor Magazine.¹⁰ Although the study lacks scientific rigor, some of the responses of teachers to the questions posed are of interest.

When asked, "Were any of those days (missed last year) stress or tension related?", thirty-three per cent of the teachers responded "yes". When asked, "Do you ever call in sick for reason of fatigue or nervous strain?", thirty-five per cent responded in the affirmative.

It is safe to say that further research is needed on the environmental conditions, both physical and psychological, that exist in schools which might contribute to this phenomena. In the present preliminary study by AASPA, the major causes of employee absenteeism cited by the participating personnel directors were (1) personal illness, (2) illness in the family, (3) personal leave days, (4) emergencies, (5) emotional problems, (6) alcohol related absences and (7) drug related absences. (It should be noted that alcohol and drug related absences were reported as quite minimal.)

It is interesting to compare the reasons for educational absences with those identified in a study dealing with salaried industrial employees. This study found the primary reasons for absences were (1) personal illness,

(2) illness in the family, (3) feigned or imagined illness and (4) a "don't care" attitude.⁵

This data supports the conclusion that the majority of employee absences are for legitimate personal or family illnesses. However, this fact must be juxtaposed with the fact that absence rates are increasing each year. While it is extremely difficult to document and verify the specific reasons for absences beyond the general categories already enumerated, it is instructive to review the subjective comments made by the personnel directors in the AASPA study. Although not empirically based, these comments do provide a flavor of some of the concerns that are being expressed throughout the nation. Comments include "lenient leave policies which have occurred through the negotiations process," "greater problems at school and less devotion to duty," "younger and less dedicated teachers," "lower morale due to the desegregation process," "sick days are more acceptable to society than before," "professional outlook toward responsibility to students is slipping," "pressures of teaching," "because we began granting personal leave days," and "lack of professionalism."

These comments seem to reflect a general feeling among personnel administrators that the criteria used by staff members in determining in their own minds the appropriateness of their absence under the prescribed leave policy is changing. A recent New York study described this as "creeping legitimacy" of a wider range of acceptable reasons for employee absenteeism.¹¹ This study indicated that younger staff members often have a much more liberal definition of permissible grounds for absenteeism. As these staff members take their places within the buildings, they serve to define the lowest common denominator of acceptable absences. Since almost all leave policies rely on self-reporting, the subtle change in standards may be a cause for the increasing absence rate. However, the lack of verifiable data in this area makes any conclusions purely speculative.

Because of the limited number of school systems gathering detailed data with respect to absence rates of various groups of employees nationwide, it is impossible to draw any generalizable conclusions about absence rates of specific groups of employees. However, in the present study, several school systems reported that elementary female teachers had a higher rate of absence than other identifiable groups. Data from industry supports rather conclusively that sex is a major absenteeism factor.⁵ This is premised on the fact that it is the man more than the woman who builds the career and, therefore, the woman is much more likely to be off for "non-essential reasons." The Pennsylvania study reported that female professional staff members have a significantly higher absence rate than male professional staff members.¹ Females have an absence rate of 5.1% while males had an absence rate of 4.2%. This averages 7.2 days of absence for male teachers and 8.9 days per female teacher. In addition, a study by the Lakeland School Corporation in Syracuse in 1973-74 found that females had an absence rate of 5.0 days, while males had an absence rate of 3.1 days.¹³ Married female teachers are much more likely to be absent, not only for their own illness, but for the illness of their children. It would appear that it is much more acceptable in our society at this time for the working wife to stay home and tend to sick children than for the working husband. This may be due to sex role stereotypes or may simply be that it is easier for a working educator wife to qualify for sick leave for this purpose than for the working non-educator husband. It will be interesting to observe what impact, if any, the increasing "liberation" of our female population will have on this phenomena. The advent of "paternity" leave as well as "maternity" leave appears to be a harbinger of changes in this area.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based upon this present survey and a review of the literature, some general conclusions and recommendations are offered for consideration:

1. Establish an employee absence monitoring system. Although this would appear to be self-evident, many school systems do not have such a system, or if they have such a system, do not use the data generated therefrom. It is impossible to know whether or not a school district has an absenteeism problem unless data has been gathered and evaluated. The sophistication of this system will vary depending upon the capabilities of each school system. Many school districts have experienced success using a data processing system. However, other districts have been equally successful using manual data collection systems. The key in each case is to determine the data which are most important to the administrators in each individual district. Absentee data is an essential ingredient of a total management information system. Failure to collect this data deprives the superintendent and the administrative staff of an important tool in the effective administration of the school district. Information that should be considered in a data collection system includes: individual employee absence rate, preferably by day of the week and by reason (i.e. personal illness, family illness, personal leave, other); total staff absence rate by building and division. All of the aforementioned data should be system-computed at least monthly. A means to collect and compare an employee's absence pattern as described above throughout his/her contract life in the district, should also be considered.

2. Absenteeism can be reduced through organized efforts. The Akron (Ohio) Schools has reported a reduction of absenteeism for professional staff from an average of 6.35 days per staff member in 1973-74 to 4.56 average days per staff member in 1976-77.¹² This translates into a sick leave savings of over \$136,442, or approximately \$68,220 per year. In one year, using many of the considerations proposed here, the Birmingham, Michigan School District reduced substitute teacher costs from \$225,000 to \$175,000.⁸ All educators could find a good use for this money in their school districts. More importantly, however, the instructional program was significantly less interrupted in each of these districts.

While the nature of the particular program used to reduce employee absenteeism must be accommodated to the needs of the particular school system, there are commonalities that would apply to any program.

These are:

- A. The program must be comprehensive. It must deal with all employees and must be well communicated throughout the school system. It should include information on the standards, procedures, and expectations governing all facets of employee absenteeism, sick leave, personal leave, emergency leave, etc. Communication should take the form of staff meetings, bulletins, and individual counseling with staff members. All personnel must be sensitized to the program and the value of regular attendance.
- B. The program must be supported from the top. A recommendation from the New York City study on teacher absenteeism

stated that the responsibility for improving teacher attendance should be assigned to a specific official of the administrative staff.⁴ If the school district does not identify this as a priority by putting the full weight of its policies behind these efforts, they are doomed to failure. Only when the teaching staff recognizes that the school system is unequivocally committed to appropriate use of leave policies is there a chance of success.

- C. The program should provide some means of recognizing and rewarding regular attendance. Perhaps the easiest and most neglected is a simple word of acknowledgment and appreciation on annual performance reviews or classroom observations. These documents often represent the only official personal contact that each teacher has with the district during the course of the year. Their importance as a motivation and reward for good performance should not be underestimated. Districts have also been successful using more formal awards of appreciation for good attendance, often presented at recognition dinners or district-wide assemblies.

On a more tangible basis, some districts and states have established programs whereby unused sick leave or portions thereof can be converted into severance pay or as retirement bonus. While these programs provide an economic attendance incentive, caution must be exercised so that teachers who are genuinely ill are not encouraged to impair their health or the health of their students.

D. Perhaps above all, any effective system must involve the teacher's immediate supervisor. Educational data and data from industry support the fact that the involvement of the immediate supervisor is the single most critical factor to the success of any program. This means in-service and specific programs for middle management staff, designed to assist them to work purposefully toward absentee reduction. The Birmingham, Michigan study suggested that each principal and/or supervisor develop a plan to control employee absenteeism.⁸ Specifically, the study recommended counseling of employees in circumstances such as the following:

1. When an employee has developed a pattern of incidental absences. (For example, frequent absences on Monday, or non-payday Friday, etc.)
2. When an employee is frequently absent for "illness" on inclement weather days.
3. When an employee is absent for illness on days before or after holidays or vacation periods.
4. When an employee is absent on certain "special days" (for example, opening day of hunting or baseball seasons, etc.).
5. When an employee who appeared to be in robust health the previous day is absent for illness.
6. When an employee has reported an absence for illness for more than one day.

3. Don't neglect classified or non-teaching employees. Although this study has been for the most part restricted to teaching employees, the data indicates that as many, if not more, total dollars are expended for non-teaching replacement employees, even though their daily rates are less than those of teaching substitutes and they are a minority of the employees in most school districts. Data in the literature suggests that the rates of absence of these employees in industry would suggest that their rates of absence will be significantly above those of teaching personnel.

Absenteeism is not going to go away and not going to decrease in incidence unless administrators work at reducing it in an organized and concerted fashion. It is a professional responsibility to develop and implement programs within school districts that will help assure students and taxpayers of the highest quality continuous education possible.

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